A Search for the Meaning of Becoming Literate: An Interpretive Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project was to explore a deeper understanding of what it is like to become literate and to probe how that experience relates to the life of the educator. Since the question focussed on the meaning and experience of the learner in a very personal sense, a phenomenological orientation was deemed to be the best way to get at that which was sought. It was felt that many studies have delved into the more quantitative aspects of literacy education, but that there has been a lack of qualitative research to help educators come to a more meaningful grasp of what becoming literate means to their students.

The three students in this study may seem to have remarkable, unfathomable or incredible stories. Nonetheless, they possess what I believe to be common themes woven within the stories of many learners in literacy programs. They are eloquent and powerful story-tellers, trusting that their experiences will help others in the struggle to become literate and offering light and hope.

This study weaves themes of being from the raw materials of the personal stories of students and teacher. Hopefully, it will provide insight into the lived-world experiences of literacy students as they strive to become literate. It is my desire that with a deeper understanding of this world, programs can be designed to enhance conditions of learning, educators will become more "in-tune" with students and literacy learning can enter a richer, more meaningful realm.

I caution, though, for those of you unfamiliar with phenomenological writings, that within this paper you may find moments of great personal insight and issues or experiences that will resonate with a deep truth within you. But, you will not find the answers articulated for you to simply pick up this document and "use" it. This type of research is intended to give you personal insight that will help you grow in a pedagogical wisdom that is right for you. As van Manen (1984b) says:

. . . . when you [read] a presentation of a phenomenological nature, you will listen in vain for the punchline, the latest information, or the big news. As in poetry, it is inappropriate to ask for a conclusion or a summary. . . . To summarize a poem in order to present a result would destroy the result because the poem itself is the result. . . . phenomenology like poetry is a poetizing project: it tries an incantative, evocative speaking, a primal telling. . . .

What we must do is discover what lies at the ontological core of our being. So that in the words, or maybe better, *in spite of* the words, we find "memories" which paradoxically we never thought or felt before. (p. 2)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I began working on this project in January 1988, I had no inkling that my life would be so profoundly different and forever changed when I finished the writing. Entering the realm of interpretive research makes us vulnerable to new, deeper experiences which, at another time, we may have reacted to in another way. Events in our lives, and the lives of those we are close to, take on a hue and texture heretofore unknown to us.

Although I typed and created this written project, I did not come to the ideas within entirely on my own. I had the help and understanding of my committee at the University of Victoria, Ted Aoki, Margie Mayfield and Ron Tinney. I always felt that they were very supportive of the work I was doing, and gave me insight and direction I would have overlooked. Gordon Thompson, my supervisor, was a steady mentor, offering encouragement and never seeming to doubt that I would be able to finish this project. I have the highest regard and respect for these professors; and I offer my humble gratitude for their support.

I also wish to thank the learners, Crystal, Rod and Aaron, who trusted me with their stories and who gave me permission to explore deeper into their lived-worlds. We are all enriched by their gift to us. The National Literacy Secretariat and the Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology supported this project through a cost-shared grant. This enabled me to be released from my teaching duties at Malaspina College for the precious months I needed to write this report.

Loved ones have entered and exited my circle throughout this researching process, showing me that our lives are indeed fluid and never set in ways we expect. My children, David and Jennifer, held me up through what would be some very dark times, and I owe them so much for this. Others in my family, affectionately known as the "Schmengies," were solid rocks of support,

encouragement and cheerleading. They were unwavering in their belief in me. And finally, I thank my Granny, Julia.

CHAPTER ONE

COMING TO THE QUESTION

As my experience in teaching Adult Literacy expands, I have found myself becoming less comfortable with the status quo in the understanding of literacy. I have begun to find more questions than answers; so I asked my students to tell me, through their journals, what it means to become literate. Their revealing and eloquent writings described what school means to them. This excerpt from Crystal's journal is typical of their feelings about literacy.

> *So maybe with school, things will change more. I just want to be like everyone else. O.K. To be able to read a book from start to finish. To know money, spell, write good. And to be able to talk to people without my words coming out backwards. It's not easy for me to talk on my own.*
>
> *Now I know I have the right to learn and can learn too, just like everyone else. And that I am not sick in the head. I am O.K. I am allowed to talk too, not just when I am told to or allowed.*
>
> *Well here I am in school and boy do I like it. No one really knows or understands how hard this is for me.*

This paper is my attempt to know and understand how hard it is for people like Crystal, and to pass that awareness on to my colleagues in the field of literacy education.

Area of Interest

I am interested in Adult Basic Education for English-speaking people who are not yet considered functionally literate. The Southam Literacy Survey (Southam News, 1987) found the number of Canadians who read and comprehend below a grade eight level to be approximately 24% of our population. The immense implications of this are magnified when I recall the student who came to my class after she had given her young son an overdose of prescribed medication because she could not read the label. Instead of 1/2 teaspoon, she had administered 1 and 2 teaspoons. Luckily, tragedy in this case was averted. Her doctor, upon hearing the cause of the accidental overdose, suggested that the woman attend literacy classes at our college. Within one year she had completed her grade 10 equivalency.

Illiteracy creeps into all aspects of our society, and I believe that everyone has been touched in some way by this problem. Consider the 35 year old tradesman who felt inadequate to sit on jury duty when he was summoned. He was denied his constitutional and human rights of taking part in our legal system, and the others in this drama were denied his valuable, sensitive and fair input. Citizens, literate or not, pay for mistakes, accidents and other situations through taxes, social problems and a society that is not making use of all its precious human potential.

I have been teaching literacy skills in a college setting for over five years and have many questions and areas of acute interest. I earnestly seek a deeper understanding of my students. What is it like to be illiterate? How are my students' lives changed and affected by going to school? Does becoming literate mean the same to everyone? What is the meaning of literacy? Does perception of personal literacy change with its acquisition? As I live in my classroom, I long to do the "right" teaching, to ground myself and my students in the "pedagogic good" (van Manen, 1984a).

The Question

After pondering these many thoughts and wonderings, and based on my philosophical orientation, I undertook a phenomenological study directed towards the understanding of these questions by asking the following:

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF BECOMING LITERATE?

So far, literacy educators have been unable to agree on an official or even common definition of "illiteracy" or "literacy" and have, therefore, been at a loss to come up with a clearly defined plan of attack on the problem of illiteracy in our country. Southam Survey statistics have indicated that illiteracy costs Canadians up to ten billion dollars per year. Both the federal and provincial governments are responding to the call for a literate society; as a literacy instructor I must be prepared to offer my expertise and skills to human beings wishing to become literate. To do this, I must first come to terms with my own understanding of literacy.

There are different levels of literacy -- one proposed by statistics, another by institutional standards and still another, deeper level, that of personal meaning. I feel illiterate when I attempt to read scholarly works such as those by Gadamer and Heidegger, and through the caring and guidance of someone who understands, I sometimes gain an understanding of my own. Likewise, a person unable to read a note sent home by a teacher or the labels on goods in a store feels insecure and stupid. We need to be able to function in our society in a manner that is comfortable and meaningful to us: this can happen if we believe in our ability to understand and learn. We can adjust to the levels of learning and literacy demanded by the situation by being aware of what literacy is and what it means to us all. It is a matter of perceiving ourselves as being in control of our learning and of our abilities to learn. If I think I am a reader and writer, I am, therefore, a reader and writer. (Apologies to Descartes.)

Related Literature

My literature search began at my fingertips, with the *Adult Basic Literacy Curriculum Guide and Resource Book* (1987). In this document, the writers define functional literacy as entailing four basic elements. They state that functional literacy:

- is a tool that can assist learners in changing their world;
- begins from the learner's point of view;
- must reflect reality and be meaningful;
- assists the learner to understand "human experience" (p. 4).

This guide provided a meaningful, second* introduction to Paulo Freire. One cannot explore the field of literacy without turning first to the works of Paulo Freire. He speaks of empowerment, liberation and voice and supports his writings with his practice and reflections on that practice. Others such as Jonathan Kozol, Audrey Thomas and Richard Darville echo and enhance Freire's ideology and sometimes alter it to fit more closely with our North American needs.

My interest began to pull me deeper into a lived-world perspective of my own thinking and searching. I discovered Arlene Fingeret and was fortunate to attend an institute facilitated by her and a colleague in June 1988. (My reflections on this institute were published in the December 1988 issue of *Groundwork*, the Journal of the Adult Basic Education Association of B.C.)

As I immersed myself in my teaching and journalling with my students, I found myself looking to the writings of others on the subject of literacy. Much of the earlier work seemed to reflect ideologies about policy and discussion of methods, but none that I read offered a reflective perspective that explored the lived-world of learners and teachers. I found that studying more recent research and papers by colleagues such as Audrey Thomas and Richard

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* I had been directed toward *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* several years ago because of my interest in literacy, but I had not truly understood the significance this work could have in shaping my early thoughts on literacy teaching.

Darville provided me with a grounding for the general issues and evolution of literacy practice as it exists today, specifically as it exists today within the environment of my teaching in the Canadian college system.

Thomas, in *Adult Literacy Perspectives* (1989), combed through a multitude of existing literature in order to make some sense of the *Definitions and Evolution of the Concepts* of literacy as we know it in our country. As yet, she concludes, we have not come to agree on an "operational" definition of literacy, but we are finding many commonalties upon which we can agree. She states that certain principles about the intricacies of reading have, in a sense, gelled within the reading specialists' community. Included in these are the concepts of personal and social contexts, a rapidly changing society and the duality or paradox of empowerment. Reading is indeed useful and desirable for personal and social use because we want to be able to function as an individual within the context of our lived-world. Unfortunately, that world is changing at such a pace in sometimes unpredictable ways, and literacy does not guarantee a place in the working world. Some people want and need literacy skills in order to have power over their environment, but others merely want to adapt to the society in which they find themselves. This creates what I believe to be a paradox of empowerment in the sense that often educators follow the lofty ideal of empowering students with functional literacy skills when some really only want to adjust, not take control. It is occurring to many of us in the field of literacy education that we may not necessarily need a common definition of literacy for the purposes of designing programs. What we need, perhaps, is a common understanding of the complexity and multi-facetedness of the literacy situation as it interconnects with the uniqueness of the individual. Possibly, then, we will be able to offer literacy education in the ways that each learner requires it.

Darville (1989) explored the notion of joining the concepts of literacy as empowerment and the many forms of literacy as experience. He reminds us that using a language experience approach with the students' own stories is a means to begin learning not only to read and write, but also to understand the more abstract or difficult world of our organized society. He says that, "in the long run, the generative power of stories provides a means to ground even

organizational literacy in the life-experiences with which learners are grappling" (28). He expands further on this notion of organizational literacy:

> Organizational literacy -- in, for example, job applications, Small Claims Court documents and union contracts -- is concerned with effecting organizational process, not with telling individual experience. It is not about experience but about the ways that experience is managed, ordered, regulated and controlled. (p. 31)

As we search for definitions of literacy and look for ideal methods of educating illiterates we cling to the infallibility of our professionalism and do not involve the learners in the decisions about their own education. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why, as educators, we have been unsuccessful in our search. The workings of a recent group of students emphatically reinforce this belief, and research exploring the deeper understanding of some individuals in this group provided invaluable insight into the empowering of literacy students.

Process

Through the natural course of my teaching and interacting with my students, I continually study their personal journals and speak very candidly and intimately with them. There continues to be a dialoguing between myself and my students. In April 1989, the students working on a government grant, planned and hosted a Literacy Awareness Workshop for the community, government and industry. This event spawned a dynamic and driving force called ALLOW for Adult Literacy Learners On the Way. This student group is in the process of officially becoming a society and is actively pursuing their goal of reaching other illiterates and helping them to learn to read and write. I recognize these happenings to be an extreme and definite example of literacy learners becoming empowered with their own strengths and abilities to actively search out those who can help them BECOME literate.

I have been keeping my own journal chronicling the evolution of this group and the individual struggles and confrontations. Themes and stories were extracted from a variety of rich sources including students' journals, our

conversations and transcripts of numerous television, radio and newspaper stories featuring the students and, on occasion, me. In this study, these themes were explored in an attempt to find the deeper ground of the experiences discussed and written about. I chose to focus on and explore the stories of three students, using the journals of two, Aaron and Crystal, and extrapolating my own interpretation of Rod's story as told to me and others. I did not have Rod's journals because, as you will see, his story precluded the actual writing of his life. He chose instead to demonstrate -- drawing me into a personal struggle I could not have anticipated nor prepared for. Crystal's story offers an understanding of the personal, inward search for meaning. Rod's demonstrates that as teachers, we cannot always "win"; sometimes the student is not ready. Aaron's story leads us on a public crusade -- a battle against the formidable foe, Illiteracy. In the interpretation of the themes and stories of Crystal, Rod and Aaron, I sometimes interwove my own experiences and themes as they had been recorded and as new ones became apparent. Through this dialoguing, reflecting and theming, I sought to discover the meaning of literacy as it is understood by both the students and me. The last chapter of this project is a reflection on my journey toward this deeper, pedagogical understanding. I continually pursue an insight into what ethically "authorizes" me to be a teacher in the field of literacy. What is it that makes me worthy of teaching the students who come to me? How is it that I am sometimes able to penetrate the past experiences of these people and help them come to another way of being? I need to look at what I believe about literacy, students, learning and myself in order to gain this deeper understanding. For this final reflection, the words of Max van Manen (1984a) ring true to my search for the meaning of literacy:

> Thoughtful learning does not only change what I know but what I am. Thoughtful learning transforms my being by making me more attentively aware of the meaning and significance of unique aspects of pedagogic situations in which I find myself as teacher.... (p. 4)

CHAPTER TWO

INTO THE LIGHT: A JOURNEY TOWARD PEDAGOGICAL TACTFULNESS

Crystal's Journal Entry

Here I am going to school again. Never thought I would be back in school. All the time I was in school, I never did go. Just didn't like it, was not good at anything they wanted me to do. So as the years went on they just passed me from one grade to another. When my sister and I went to Catholic school it was very hard. Willie and me we are left-handed. So we were not allowed to write with our left hand. Our book would be tore up and we would have to pray. Our mom took us out in grade 5. The next school we liked. You could wear pants or a dress or shorts. As far as school work went, I just couldn't get it. So they just passed me too. My sisters and brothers are good. Just me -- something went wrong along the way with me. My dad just brought me up and taught me my women's place. Do as you're told or else. So that's what I did, or else. So at 17, married with one child, doing what I was told or else again. Ten years I lived with that and a lot more, and with one more child. Never had anyone to talk to. Not allowed! I've went through a lot in my first marriage. I never, never knew that I have rights as a person. All I thought was that marriage just was pain and more pain in every way. But here I am after all that what I gone through with him and my dad. I still have a lot of problems within myself. Now I know I have the right to learn and can learn too, just like everyone else. And that I am not sick in the head. So where does the men in this world hear this? I am O.K. I am allowed to talk too,

not just when I am told to or allowed. I still have problems with that. But in time....

In the light

me

Crystal

The Journey Begins

This poignant initial journal entry was the beginning of an unplanned, significant journey. My questions about her first impressions of school and learning inspired my student to share these thoughts, and to entrust me with the disclosure of deep-seated emotional trauma and pain. I did not know that I would begin a parallel inward journey as I began to read and experience the horror and, gloriously, the emancipation of another soul I have had the privilege to touch. I embodied the words of Max van Manen (1984b). "Even minor phenomenological research projects require that we not simply raise a question and possibly soon drop it again, but rather that we 'live' this question or, better, that we 'become' this question."

Journey, according to the *World Book Dictionary*, is a traveling from one place to another. The place, topos, of my edification as a true teacher is, as always, within me. It is defined and illuminated by the themes of my life and journey towards becoming an authentic, caring teacher of others. As my own themes develop and reveal themselves to me, I become more attuned to the themes within the stories of my students. I am able to, with their humble invitation, share in the real telling and re-experiencing of meaningful stories through journalling. I did not know what awaited me as I confidently shadowed Crystal through her journal entries.

By following the hidden path of my own memories and experiences, I suddenly plunged into a darkened, cold world revealed in Crystal's journal. Sometimes the pain became almost unbearable for me: I began to waken in the middle of the black night, feeling Crystal's/my anguish. My own journal offered release for me on one such evening:

I have felt extremely moved and pressured by the journal of Crystal, my student. Her abuse and tortured past are coming through in her writings. . . . Some of the events in the journal are deeply disturbing to me and I feel the need to share my feelings with someone trained in this area.

Through all this, I feel the Theme of "Coming Into Light" for Crystal to be significant. . . .

What is it for her to become aware of herself? Of Light? Of Awareness?

The weeks that followed found me becoming inextricably involved with the story unfolding in the personal journal of Crystal. Sometimes, the fact that she survived at all seemed like a miracle. What clues to the true meaning of her awareness and poise could be uncovered by a thoughtful studying of her own words? What is the meaning of her trust in me -- to share such a personal and painful past? My integrity and ethics were to serve as a grounding for this revealing of herself. Crystal's story compelled me deeper and deeper into a shadowy world: her journal fascinated and seduced me into facing depths of my own being in synchronicity with her story. It began and remains in simple, yet profound prose hiding the intensity of the experiences from all but those wishing to truly understand.

The Else

I was 16 when I quit school. Lots of things going on at home, mostly bad. Lots of fighting between mom and dad. All my 16 years of life fighting, fighting. I thought that's the way marriage was, fighting. Just doing what you were told, or else. As long as the man of the house was happy, everything was O.K. If not, that's when the Else *came in. No one wanted that, so you did what you were told.*

This excerpt hints at the darkness that permeated Crystal's early life. Through conversations, I learned that the "Else" usually meant being locked in a lightless, earthen-floored root cellar under the house.

Mom was good to me. She made sure I was fed and watered and clean, all my growing years at home. I loved her so much and still do. In a different light now.

At this point, her mother saved her from very real physical deterioration. She was "fed and watered" like an animal with no concern for her humanness or worth. "In a different light now" hints that with the awareness yet to be described or told, Crystal understands her mother's role in protecting her from the *Else.*

Crystal got a job and finally a place of her own but her money still went to the dominant and all-powerful person in her life, her father. This slowly began to change as a young, fellow employee took more than a passing interest in her. He began to control her actions and life. Her first indication that this young suitor was substituting for her parent was revealed when she found out she was pregnant and spent five dollars of her own money to buy some comfortable shoes.

The guy got very mad. And the else *came out right there and then. Well, I went to work after that with the else all over my face. No one even asked me if I was O.K. They were so used to me looking like that. "Oh well," they just thought, "It's just* crystal. *So!" Anyway we were married, just like home. I thought marriage, here I was. Us women must please our men in any way, or the else comes. So you do. As the days went by, the else came more, more, more.*

This *Else* was physical, mental and emotional abuse. It was the man's prerogative to do as he pleased with his possession. The dark and foreboding events in Crystal's life continued with little inkling of anything better or different to hope for.

Our baby girl was born. I was so happy, but little did I know what was in store for me. I soon found out. The room where I was put was dark, cold. I didn't want to be there. So I did what [he] wanted or the else would come with the room. My body was tired of the else. I didn't like marriage. But it was my place to please and please or the else came in

too. So I taught myself to not cry out anymore. O.K. that was done. I knew how to cry in but not out now. O.K. next to learn not to think. That was hard, very hard. I just couldn't teach myself to do that. So I just didn't say anything. It worked. I was happy with that. No else or room.

for now

"For now" was not long, after a while Crystal realized she was pregnant once again.

When my guy found out the fan hit the roof. As the days passed my guy hated me. He tried to make me lose the baby. So the day came when my son was born. My guy didn't see me all the time I was there. My son was lucky to be alive. From all that my guy did. My son was full of blood clots, he smelled so, so, so bad. But I love him anyway. He was mine, all mine. On the way home [from the hospital] my guy was mad at the baby, so he started hitting him in his little face. So I threw him over the front seat in the back of the car. My son landed between the front seat and the back seat. There he stayed until we got home. Crying all the way. And I mean crying. We got home. I waited until [my husband] got out and went to his ham [radio operator's] room. Then I went to get my son out of the car. He was asleep. Blood was all over him. I cleaned him up, fed him the bottle. Put him in the closet behind some boxes. He slept good until the next feeding. He was a very good baby. I think he knew he had to be quiet. And he did. My son and I were happy, very happy together. I wanted to leave so bad but couldn't. No one cared. No place to go. STUPID. STUPID. I WAS. I slept in my room with my son. It seemed to be safe there.

A Tiny Ember Is Kindled

For Crystal, the darkest days were upon her. She spent her time being abused and locked with her infant son in an abysmal closet. The care of her daughter had been all but taken over by her husband's evil mother. But from this dismal existence, a strength of character was developing unseen. Even

though they moved as they had countless times in the past, a spark was being nurtured in her tortured spirit.

> *I made a few friends, good friends. One lady and I got to be very close. I soon learned that my marriage was a "toldle."* I don't know how to write it down. But it was, that's all I can say. Boy! I just don't know about myself how I could have been so so so SO stupid.*

This questioning and self-berating shows Crystal's dawning awareness of her gloomy existence. This is the only time in Crystal's storying that she expresses her frustration at being unable to spell the word she wishes to use. Her comment indicating this fact and her recurring lament about "how could I have been so stupid" reflects the deeper, hidden meaning within her story.

How could she have been so *Blind*? To be locked in a blackened root cellar or closet temporarily obscured her sight, she was unaware of her own strength or inner light.

> *My guy was not happy now. I didn't know why. But now I do. For I was making friends which I never had and learning about life -- marriage, children, love, just everyday things most people just know. It was like a whole different world for me and a lot nicer to be in. I wanted to know more. So I talked a lot to my new found friends. They all thought I was crazy and very, very green. And it was true, I was. But I thought they were and all they were telling me was a lie. I just couldn't see that marriage, love was a good thing. Sometimes I wanted to stop people in the street just to ask them. Is it true? As the days passed I thought more, more about all this.*

Before Dawn

> *Things then got very bad. There were days and days that I didn't see the sun. My body felt weak, my mind was not working right. I just*

---

* There were three scratched out trials at the spelling of this word. I understand that she was trying to express something that was deeper than words for her.

couldn't think any more. My son was 4 then. No kids to play with, no toys in the room. Dark. We had a hard time seeing each other. I would try to make games up but it was hard. My mind and body needed the sun, food.

No one understands what all went on, and never, never will. . . .

In the spring if I remember right, my guy wanted me to go outside and get some firewood. I didn't understand why, but I did what I was told. While I was picking up the wood, my guy started shooting at me. I didn't know why or what I did to him. I was being good. When he stopped he just stood there and laughed. When he fell asleep, I took my son and left in my car.

This brave action propelled Crystal into this different world of light and learning and caring friends that she had only guessed at before. Her husband did not give up easily, but the torch of awareness was burning too fiercely for him to douse. She was on her way.

Well after all that, I got my divorce. Time to move on and that's when the Light came in to my life. By a dream I had one night.

In the Light

Into the Light

Crystal signed all her journals with the same three words, "In the light"; but this entry was the first and only one in which she capitalized the last word. She had traveled through her personal darkness and reached a threshold of enlightenment.

My reading of this journal entry was accompanied with a joyousness for I, too, had been through the fire. Crystal's awareness of her uniqueness and value poured out for me to experience in concert with her. She had been a victim of physical, spiritual and emotional darkness, but now the brilliance of her own worth glowed.

My sharing of this journey with Crystal illuminated darkened sections of my mind in which my ignorance of her deep lived-world shaded my effectiveness as a true teacher. Until we traveled the path in harmony, we could not have an understanding of the world we share at this moment. My questioning and reflecting on the theme of darkness into light led me to the puzzling of the etymological roots of the words "journey" and "journal." The Old French "journee" and Late Latin "diurnus" disclose the aspects of day or daily. Through a journal and journeying, an awareness or consciousness of the self is brought to light -- a new day begins for the soul with each step towards the light of personal wisdom.

What significance does this have for the pedagogical good? What knowledge is revealed by this dawning of awareness? How has this shared story transformed us? Novak (1978) offers insight:

> A story does not merely connect action to action. It also recounts a struggle. . . . Life, when it is life, is struggle. . . . The key struggle of life is that of psychic transformation: of breakthroughs in the way one perceives events, imagines oneself, understands others, grasps the world, acts. . . . Thus, pedagogically, good teachers aim directly at the experience, imagination, stories of their students. . . . Good education is a constant series of new births. . . . Wisdom . . . is acquired slowly: To grow in wisdom, then, is to have undergone many transformations. . . . And each transformation of one's horizon is for the sake of a profounder, more comprehensive penetration into the mystery of one's own existence, into the reality of the world in which we live. (pp. 53-58)

It has been one and one-half years since Crystal and I shared this transformative path through journalling. Since then she has remained a student in the literacy class and has assumed a powerful role as a model to other learners. Even though very few know the extent of the horror she has lived, she spreads her light of awareness and hope through public speeches and private conversations; the intense depth of her understanding grounds her as a steady rock. Through meetings and strategy planning sessions for the promotion of literacy issues, Crystal's contributions reveal a wisdom more

potent than any written word could inspire. She truly lives and speaks her literacy. Reading, writing and basic math skills seem to be mere tools which enable her to make herself more clearly understood and give her the self-confidence to free her marvelous spirit. Crystal's journey from physical, mental and spiritual darkness to enlightenment is reflected in her writings and her learning of literacy skills. Her discovery of the Light enabled her to begin learning all things; it freed her from the bondage of an imposed darkness. Pondering this glorious state of being, I remembered an anonymous story of a butterfly:

> The butterfly is a beautiful and active creature. In its process of metamorphosis, it emerges from the pupa. It puts up a tremendous struggle to break out of its chitinous shell.
>
> A nature lover, once noticing this, thought that the creature should be saved the struggle. With great dexterity, he used a scalpel to cut away the shell. Then the butterfly emerged without a struggle.
>
> But it was lame; it could not fly . . .

The greater wisdom in this metaphor is not lost to Crystal: on the contrary, she has perceived an eternal truth carefully guarded within self awareness. We would be lame if any well-meaning teacher robbed us of the privilege of the struggle. Our journeys help us to understand others. We can travel in harmony as teacher and student, human being and human being, lighting the path for each other, giving support, and always rejoicing in the uniqueness of our becoming.

> *I thank the light what I know now and what has been. For I can grow more than all those who have not been there.*

CHAPTER THREE

STRUGGLE:
WHAT IS IT LIKE WHEN A STUDENT TAKES AWAY FROM THE TEACHER?

A gardener lovingly tends her little patch of earth, carefully tilling the soil, nurturing and allowing her precious flowers to blossom. She waits patiently for each tiny shoot in its own time, to push through the crust of soil, unfold its delicate green leaves and to finally burst into the best flower it can possibly be. Sometimes, however, the gardener does not know that a seemingly fragile bud is not a true flower at all. Occasionally, it will be a malignant seed.

Have you ever watched a dandelion come to flower? It has a soft sprout which heralds a fuzzy, deep yellow bloom. The shape and texture of the blossom invites a comparison to the mighty feline of its namesake. Later, the soft puffs of downy orbs enchant the observer. To the gardener, worry lies hidden in the deception of these seeds. She cannot control the spread of this weed; the damage becomes scattered throughout her world and beyond. The insidious weed has invaded the gardens of others.

Some stories softly beckon to be told, gently resting on your shoulder, whispering promises of a deeper understanding. This story could have been, and indeed initially appeared to be, like this docile murmur.

Story Crying to be Told

He walked up the stairs with a self-assured gait. His sports coat and tie perfectly complemented his rusty hair and full beard, reminding me of a

fuzzy-faced lion trying to assure his place. The portfolio he carried was clutched closely under his arm.

Words began to tumble out of his mouth. His pudgy, speckled hands fumbled with the ties on the portfolio and he started to show me several magazine stories, newspaper clippings, photographs, and letters of recommendation from certain government officials. Why was he bombarding me with these things? I couldn't possibly read or even scan the texts he placed before me at such a pace. What did he want me to do?

Rod's story, urgently, insistently, poured out in a deluge of confusing incidents and pain. He was showing me his work. He had written stories while he was a foreign journalist for Reuters, on the road with the Man in Motion Tour and on the campaign and public relations trail for highly placed government officials. How can this be? Journalists and public relations men are literate. He must be confused about what department this is. "No, it is true," he insisted, "I can neither read nor write and, at forty-three, I have been faking it for too long."

I have been preaching for years that illiteracy is everywhere in our society and was fascinated that someone so seemingly "literate" would in fact be unable to read and write. Rod had obviously been coping very well at times in his professional life; what was it that compelled him to come to my program?

Literacy of Empowerment

Initially, I was almost inclined to question Rod's authenticity. Was he a plant trying to glean a sensational story about illiteracy at the expense of the legitimate literacy students, or was he investigating the practices of literacy instructors? After all, he had come at a timely opportunity; we were preparing a workshop for government, business and community people to share the lived-experiences of illiterates and to explore ways to work together on erasing or reducing this problem. Rod seemed to have all kinds of connections behind the walls of the parliament buildings. He knew secretaries' first names and was able to convince certain members of parliament and legislature to come to the workshop or send supporting

telegrams. Once I walked into my office to hear, "Well, thanks anyway, Mila [aka Mrs. Mulroney]. Yes, we will look forward to seeing you in the fall."

Gradually, Rod became a strong influence on the environment of our school of literacy. One day as I was in the classroom, we were trying to come up with a catchy name for the workshop. We toyed with many acronyms -- LEARN, HELP or LITERATE did not have the punch we were searching for. Jokingly, I suggested ALLOW standing for Adult Literacy Learners On the Way and everyone laughed but it went on the board with the other suggestions. By the next week, Rod had organized the group, and ALLOW became his battlecry.

Largely under Rod's direction, the other students were making calls and writing letters, all with the common goal of reaching as many influential people as possible to be part of our event. I was busily and sometimes exhaustively providing the best guidance and support I could. I was thrilled to see the power of the students' will and desire to accomplish something meaningful being manifested in such a positive and fulfilling manner. Maybe this is what Freire means by empowerment!

An Emerging Uneasiness

While I was electrified by the activities of the students, I sometimes could not help but feel uneasy about some of the situations and circumstances Rod appeared to orchestrate. He seemed to have the others running about doing what he suggested while skillfully having them believe that it was their own desire or idea. Thus began the first of many discussions between Rod and myself about dealing fairly, openly and honestly with others. I began to feel that he was, although perhaps not maliciously, manipulating those around him. I puzzled, pondered and prayed. What enabled him to become so forceful and aggressive? What direction should I take in this? What were my motives? Was I sensing a loss of my power as an instructor or coordinator?

Days whizzed by, swirling with activity and success. The workshop gathered great acclaim and ALLOW was becoming a powerful force reaching out to the rest of the province and the country. The Minister of Advanced

Education came out of a cabinet meeting to speak with us and to offer support and promises of funding of ALLOW projects. I was being pulled deeper into this eddy. Rod was doing none of the writing: he was simply dictating to others. I began to question him, asking when he would be working on his writing skills since after all that was one of his reasons for coming to class. But he would give many excuses such as, "These have to be sent right away," and "I don't have my stuff here right now." I sensed a familiar pattern of avoidance in his non-actions in this regard. As a matter of fact, isn't this how he said he had survived in the world of journalism? His game was to get other people to do his work for him so he wouldn't have to reveal his secret.

The Silent Struggle Begins

I worried because sometimes our conversations became almost confrontational; twice he told me that I was unhappy because he had become empowered. Although this was one of my secret fears, I suggested that maybe he was misusing his power in some ways and that he could be on a destructive path. I did not want to see him hurt by his actions.

One day I walked into the office I share compatibly with two others and was dismayed to find that both desks were piled high with ALLOW letters and papers, and that while one student was using the computer, Rod was on the phone. I was beginning to wonder if I would ever have my peaceful space and sanctuary back. From the one-side of the phone conversation, I learned that I was to be one of the guests on a television talk show. After Rod hung up, I asked him when this show was to be taped and what he had said I would be talking about, with whom. This was getting to be too much. Frequently, I would come to work and have Rod tell me of several commitments he had made for me and others.

I have questioned myself endlessly on why I let this happen; after all, I am usually very much in control of my own behaviour and schedule. Always my answer is that these speaking engagements and media spots are increasing public awareness of literacy; and for the last six years, I have been on what seemed like a one-woman community campaign to achieve this goal. Now,

because of the skills of a professional like Rod, my ideals were reaching people throughout the entire country. But why was I feeling so uncomfortable?

Fundamental Differences

Another incident which illuminates what felt like an attack on my individuality and integrity is shown by the changes in Rod's focus. For the first two and a half months, he was lobbying and soliciting government officials and community groups to donate money to ALLOW for the opening of a Downtown Learning Centre to be largely run by literacy students with the help of college teaching staff. Wheels were in motion for thousands of dollars to be donated for this cause. However, midstream this fund drive, Rod abruptly switched to another cause he wished to pursue. He wanted to travel the country, living with illiterates and in fact, do an ethnographic study. Ethically, I believe that it is not right to solicit money for one cause and spend it on an entirely different goal. Discussing this got us no further to a compromise or satisfactory solution to our differences. He felt that I now represented a repressive institutional image that was seeking to undermine his wishes and dreams. "You don't want illiterates to speak for themselves," he accused me. Those words sliced through my teacher's heart, showing no mercy to the carefully cultivated gentleness I have so steadfastly nurtured within. "How could he spit such venom towards me?" I wondered.

For a few months, newspaper clippings and reports told that Rod also wanted to bring country-wide attention to the rail transportation issue and that in response to some government action concerning funding, he threatened a hunger strike. It became clear that since he had "come out of his personal closet," Rod developed a voracious appetite for media attention, and the literacy issue alone would not satisfy this craving any longer.

A Question of Power

My questioning of my own teaching was becoming more acute by this time, but still was merely skirting the margins of this question. I continued my inner struggle with the concept of empowerment. What is power? What does

it mean for a literacy student to become empowered? How does one person empower another? What does it mean for the teacher to empower a student? And what is the meaning of teacher empowerment? How do you know if someone is empowered? My own journal helped give voice to some of my frustrations: one entry asks, "Who put the POW in empowerment?" This notion of power has been a key concept in my education as a literacy instructor -- a good teacher allows the student to take power and control over his or her own learning. The instructor merely facilitates and guides in partnership the activities of the student. Until Rod, my students have followed some unwritten, (ethical?) law of shared, respectful power. No one has tried to subjugate me or strip me of my responsibility or desire to teach. In a whirlwind three month period, Rod brought me to the brink of a completely new experience in pedagogy.

In many ways I felt that Rod had stepped into my personal space, that he had, without my permission, become part of my life that I did not willingly choose to share. If he had asked to use my desk, asked to have permission to make appointments or engagements for me or acknowledged that he was stepping into my space, perhaps I would not have felt so violated. Of course, I would have said, "yes," to those things, but I wanted the opportunity to agree. Willful acceptance of a partnership is an ethical necessity for me. The *World Book Dictionary* defines "will" as the "power of the mind to decide and do" and "the act of choosing to do something." The concept of choice is inherent, if one is manipulated in such a way as to have no choice, then that person feels powerless.

I came to understand that my office was no longer mine; others had set up residence. They sat on my chair, used my phone and made appointments on my behalf. Where was the "I" or "my" under these conditions? I had ceased to exist except for perhaps being one who is planned for. My values now seemed at risk. I believe that students must have control over their own learning environment, but that does not include taking over. In a true pedagogical situation, there is a deep need of a partnership, an equal distribution and balance of power.

Theme of Control

As Rod told me many times, he had always coped and hid his severe insecurities by using the skills of others -- he employed typists and writers to do his assignments. Any time he found himself without those others to use, he would escape and run to another situation that he could control. Always, in the recesses of his mind, was the terror of being found out, of someone discovering that he was not a truly valuable human being. Knowing this, I had tried to encourage him to face his illiteracy and not to be ashamed. I searched for ways to make him believe that he IS worthwhile and that his skills are indeed unusual. But by appearing to give him control as an individual, I seemed to have lost my personal control. The balance was tipped.

As I pondered the situation, I felt more and more confused about my own motives. What is control? Do I seek it completely? I see that the roots of the word "control" are from Old French contre and rolle meaning to "roll against" and earlier from the Latin rota meaning "wheel." These wheels appeared to be rolling against my own values of being truthful and carrying out that which one has promised to do. I used to believe that, as an instructor, I was quite certain about what I was doing. My experience during this latest global surge of interest in teaching literacy to adults has shown me that my instincts as a teacher are to be trusted. The more I taught, the more secure I felt in my own abilities. But this conflict with Rod made me question my practice. I asked myself if I have ever served the pedagogical good. I still seek to understand this conflict, to truly understand the dynamics of this interaction so that I may learn from it. Should this personal discord be allowed to influence my being as a teacher? I turned to reflection and journal writing in hopes that this relationship could be illuminated and that I could have a more universal understanding of this conflict. I began to realize that I was allowing one student to obstruct my instruction of many others.

Theme of Loss

Upon returning to the basic concepts and components of literacy, I am reminded that there is no easy or clear definition to literacy (Fingeret, Freire,

Thomas). Most agree however, that reading, writing, speaking and social interaction are the four cornerstones toward which one must strive if a desirable level of literacy is to be achieved. People may naively believe that somehow these skills or gifts develop in a fairly balanced manner; that one can judge a person's literacy level by speaking to them, reading thei- writing or even watching them in a social milieu. Of course, this is not true. In Rod's case, he was extremely articulate and he had a marvelous amount of political savvy. The degree of his adept manipulation of others displayed a very high level of social literacy. In the beginning, I offered Rod my hand as a guide toward reading and writing skills, but he always had an excuse as to why he was not ready. At times, I believed his evasions and did not push my help any further. Perhaps a pattern of non-learning developed over his three months with me, or maybe it was a firmly entrenched standard by the time our paths met. In any case, Rod did not ever try to work on mundane reading and writing activities. The lure and seduction of the events and media attention were too much.

I wondered why he had such a burning desire to be labelled literate when he had such strong verbal and manipulative abilities. Anyone meeting him would have no doubt that he was indeed very literate, yet by coming to a basic literacy class, he tried to face his personal, secret humiliation. I now wonder further that had the class not already been working on the public workshop when he became a student, if Rod would have tried harder to attain the skills he lacked. The event could have provided Rod with the perfect, irresistible diversion and detour from his course.

I feel a deep sense of mourning for the student that could have been, and for the great loss I perceive through this experience. In some bizarre way, I sense that something has been taken from me against my will. I have been denied the privilege of exploring new learning with a student. All that I offered was rejected, and through that rejection, I have been robbed. In a true pedagogical situation, there is a shared desire to interconnect with the other, but here there was no sharing. Rod remained closed to any teachings I may have tried to share with him. He built a fortress around himself that, for now, was impenetrable. Instead, he took: control of my office. . . . Control of the

activities of the other students. . . . Advantage of people who want to help him. . . .

Struggle for Wisdom

This was like an Initiation for me. By passing through the fires of doubt, mistrust and frustration, I may now be able to reach the opening of a new dimension in my pedagogical environment. The paths I have travelled, the students I have encountered, and the good I have done are now at a point where an immense change is taking place within me. Without the conflict, I would remain in many aspects, on the outside, at the fringe of true teaching. Until one experiences the total upsetting of one's ideals, values and assumptions, change and growth are stunted. This, now, is becoming clearer.

Rod was a part of my "student garden," and I chose to take some responsibility for his actions. For months I was compelled to make myself aware of his actions, yet I was uncertain as to why I still did this. Perhaps the fascination, like a spell, kept me under some peculiar control. The inner voice that cautioned me in the beginning about his authenticity and that eventually led me to question my very pedagogical being is a curious little voice; it would not want to miss the good parts of the story. Even though at the time of this writing Rod's whereabouts are unknown, I hope that he is safe; he has so much to give this world.* Maybe next time he will be open to learning the basic reading and writing skills he feels he lacks, and maybe the teacher will be ready for him.

This story does not simply tell of a series of events and activities; instead, it recounts a struggle in which I must rejoice. The words of Michael Novak (1978) ring true and offer hope:

> when struggle is taken away, life goes flat; boredom, shame, uneasiness emerge. . . . A story . . . links transformations. . . . The [story-line] zigzags, as if seeking out the spot for a breakthrough.

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* Rod was reported missing by his landlady in late January 1990. To my knowledge, no one has seen or heard from him since mid-December 1989.

> . . . Good education is . . . new ways of experiencing, perceiving, imagining, proceeding. When breakthroughs happen frequently, education is a joy. . . . (pp. 52-57)

Yes, there has been struggle, but there have been many breakthroughs as well. These breakthroughs have enlightened my thinking, orienting it to another dimension of pedagogical tact. Rod's story, with its twisting path of many beginnings, becomes my story. I am changed through this journey, my transformations are tiny steps toward a greater wisdom and joy.

CHAPTER FOUR

PROMETHEUS UNBOUND

What is it like when a student searches for that something deep within himself that will give him the recognition and acceptance he so desperately craves? What if that something is literacy? Years of hiding, lying and covering up are suddenly coldly exposed when a student enters a public literacy program. The student tries to learn, but he can only write of his failures and deceit and occasionally he falls back into despair. The moment finally arrives when his personal pain is exhausted in print and he cries for more.

"PLEASE TEACH ME HOW TO WRITE SOMETHING ELSE!"

Aaron's Story

Aaron's story begins as many other stories -- with emotional and physical pain. After struggling through a childhood of feeling unwanted, unloved and persecuted for his weaknesses, he tried to make a better life for himself by raising his own family.

> *Every time I look at my past I feel how cheated out of life I have been because of my education. I feel that I can't stand on my own. I feel like half a man. . . . My mother . . . married . . . an abusive person. He would beat me and treat me like trash. I would have to stay in a back room in the house and was not to come in the main house only to eat and when I came to eat I was not allowed to talk at the table or look around. I had to look at the plate and if I did anything, I would get hit on the hands with a knife.*

I was compared to my sisters a lot as the dummy. It was Hell.

Theme of Wanting to be Heard

This forced isolation and imposed silence gnawed at Aaron's heart until, after years of this treatment, there was a rawness that could not heal. Thus began the cycle of lying and covering up his problems with literacy.

> *I sat down on Saturday night and watched* Bluffing It *with my wife. And all through the movie I explained how it related to me. . . . Every time I see it I see myself in it so much. Remember when I told you that I would, excuse the term, Bullshit people. If I made this movie I would have named it* The Bullshitter *because that's all I have ever did to people and mostly to myself. And I still do it because when I am asked what I am taking, I say Math and English. All I ever said to them when they asked why I was going to school is that I didn't get my grade 12 but I neglected to tell them I only had grade 5. I am too ashamed about that fact. They just figure that if you're older, that you have your upper grades. A lot of my suicide actions of the past stem from feeling the way I do about my education. . . . I keep running from person to person to help me out of this feeling that is eating me up.*

Aaron would cover up his reading and writing inadequacies in order to avoid being hurtled back to that dreadful place of shame and ridicule. He would tell others half the story of his college classes, becoming more than adept at changing the subject when it got too close to the truth. His personal charm and skill with the spoken word held him steady in this charade and avoidance. At work, the story was the same . . . his excuses for not completing courses for certain work credentials were that he either lacked time or was having some crisis in his personal life. He never told them that he couldn't read the text. What could he do now?

Aaron slowly began to write his feelings in the form of longer and longer journal entries. He told of how he was "talking to a lot of people" about his problems of low self-esteem, poor literacy skills and feelings of inadequacy. After the writing began, he was able to voice his feelings to only a trusted few.

Gradually, the number of those who heard Aaron's story grew and almost magically, he stepped out of his own personal closet and declared publicly that he was functionally illiterate. This moment was a Keynote Address to a large gathering of peers, college personnel, politicians, and business and labour representatives. A trembling voice began with:

> *I am illiterate. At first that statement used to choke me to say but the more I say it, the easier it is to say.*

The speech continued with Aaron's life story and was generously sprinkled with encouragement to his peers and to other illiterates that were not even present to hear his words. He wanted to reach the world with his story -- to build a bridge of understanding and hope between those who are literate and those who are not. His words were no longer choked and strangled; the sound of his pain and new-found anticipation was clearly articulated for all ears.

Theme of Being Bound

> *It all started when they at the mill were starting to talk about building a new mill. I was doing a job I didn't like that much at all but it was a job, I was producing something. Now they were talking about building a new mill that you would have to get a grading ticket to get a good job in or even a job at all. All I could think of was I wasn't smart enough to get the grading ticket. It worried me so much I might lose my job or get a job that was repetitious and you didn't have to think at all. All I could think was I was going to get a job I hated and I would have to work in that job for the next thirty years because I didn't have enough education to do anything else. This bothers me so very much that I feel that I couldn't do anything else. I hid this fact from most everyone. I used to go to work and on the job think how useless I was, how I couldn't help my family, myself or anyone because of my education. At the end I used to cry on the job. Most people will never know the feelings of feeling so useless to yourself or anyone else enough to kill yourself. The feeling of being so inferior to all the other people around you that you felt that eliminating yourself from the face*

of the earth would be the best thing you could do for your family and yourself. I used to look at people with handicaps and think "Well, maybe if I was in a class with them I would do better because I know I could most likely be more advanced than them." I'd ask myself what kind of a human being am I to think of such a thing that I would prey on less fortunate people than myself to build my own confidence.

Then when I was 17 I got in a car accident that almost killed me. I was crippled up for over two years. When I was in the hospital my real father shot himself to death. . . . [all that is happening to me now] reinforces the feeling that I have, that I have ruined everything I have ever done. This is why I feel a lot of times I can't go on. Go on to ruin someone else's life. It is kind of living in Hell for me right now. A lot of times I wished I had been born into another home where people would have cared more about me. I don't like to feel I am feeling sorry for myself. But it makes me mad as Hell.

Indeed it was Hell. A few months before he wrote this, Aaron took a steel blade and slashed both his wrists. The despair of being chained to an unchallenging job he hated, letting his family down and possibly perpetuating a cycle of abuse was too heavy a burden for his already over-loaded shoulders. To some this may seem like the supreme escape; perhaps, to Aaron it was more. It may have been his final attempt to seek solace in the ultimate silence of death. His frustration and anger could no longer be contained within his inner emotional being. A cry for understanding, help and acceptance resounded as his life's blood oozed.

This anger is like a ferocious winter Ocean storm where the waves are forty feet high crashing against the cliffs of the shores. And as we all know, a hundred feet away from those shores twenty feet down in depth, it is calm and serene and not a ripple to be seen or felt.

The Ocean creatures are oblivious to what's happening on the Ocean's surface. This is what I mean about anger shows on the outside and it's so easy to forget that on the inside there is a good and compassionate person that cares about the other person and people in general. . . . We

must live our daily lives confronting our anger and other's anger on a daily basis knowing deep down inside there is a good human being that has been hurt in some way to make him react in that inadequate human trait Anger.

Mercifully, it was this profound knowing that rescued Aaron from being drowned in the wake of his anger. As he wrote of his desperation and hopelessness, a wave of longing for the silence of nothingness again surfaced to tempt him to give up. The next journal entry I received from him was blackened around the edges: a fire had nearly claimed Aaron's writings as he tossed his life and writings into his fireplace. A deeper hope prevailed, and at the last second, he snatched his words from the flames and reclaimed his voice as if on the wings of the phoenix.

From this point, Aaron began to look at himself in a different light; he was reaching out to the world, trusting that he would no longer be bound and gagged by his own vision of himself. He wrote of a happy time he had over the weekend; a time when he had played his harmonica on stage with a band in a local blues bar. His writing blazed with the joy of being appreciated and accepted for his talent. It was at this junction that I responded to his words with "Now that you've written such an UP journal, I'm going to circle some spelling mistakes for you to correct. Aren't I sweet? (There are very few spelling errors and you should be extremely PROUD of yourself. So there!)". He echoed with fervent and voracious writing; pages and pages flowed from his pen as his dreams and hopes took shape. He learned how to use the computer and found that the word processor was a fantastic aid. He now believed that it had given him a voice he never had before. Where he used to rely on his wife to write letters for him, he could now do it himself. Through writing, he experienced a renewed personal inner growth and the words set him free. He began to express his intense desire to tell others what it is like to be illiterate. He became a crusader with a valiant cause.

Theme of Battle

I wanted to know what it felt like inside for him after 16 months of attacking his literacy problem, so I asked him to paint a picture with words to help me

understand his feelings about literacy. He told me of a battlefield; a place where the horrible monster of illiteracy was on the run and he, a naked warrior, was standing with no visible protection, only the power to read and write. He then said:

> *I know I'm not illiterate, but I don't think I'm literate. There is so much more for me to learn. I still have trouble with basic things . . . like the alphabet. When I go to use the phone book or a dictionary, I'm not sure about the order of the letters. I feel degraded a lot of times even now. The final battle hasn't been won yet.*

What can a person do when he is waging a monumental battle and he wants to enlist the help of caring others as well as invite the downtrodden to take up arms and join the fight? For Aaron, the answer to this seemed to unfold naturally as he carried his banner throughout his everyday existence. People began to listen and take notice of the courageous man. His employer, a large industrial conglomerate, noticed the exceptional qualities within this man in their employ. They believed that he could be an example to the hundreds of others hiding behind masks of bravado, loneliness and anger. How could they make use of his gifts? The answer to this question presented itself when a highly placed manager attended the workshop in which Aaron told his story. Wheels were set in motion to release Aaron from his regular job at the mill so that he could become a full-time advocate and spokesperson for a literate society. He was also invited to sit on several boards as a representative of other, less articulate functionally illiterate people.

Armed with the swords of improved self-esteem and a noble cause, Aaron's words were heard throughout the country. He waged his battle in the newspapers, at speaking engagements and on radio and television airwaves. He felt he was fighting for all the other thousands who could or would not fight for themselves. He took up their burden along with his own armour and charged ahead, never knowing what obstacles were lurking behind the trees in the darkened forest of ignorance.

Dawning of a Revitalized New Life

Like the Greek Titan Prometheus, Aaron's desire to enhance the lives of others was not without cost. He was chained to his own rock of despair, dashed hopes and delays, but his life-spark was ever present, rejuvenating and nurturing this valiant warrior. Aaron works tirelessly on his crusade: each new day challenges him to learn more about reading and writing as he spreads the word and offers faith to those around him. A gift of knowledge and a gentle, caring heart are the weapons he wields to destroy the monster who held him captive for so many years. His words resonate:

I KNOW WHERE I'M GOING, I HAVE A FOCUS.

THROUGH LITERACY, I'VE GAINED LIFE.

CHAPTER FIVE

REFLECTIONS ON HUMAN WEAVINGS

I began my search into the realm of curriculum studies, and more specifically the meaning of literacy education, with an inner voyage -- an unwrapping of who I am as a teacher. I began to ask, "what authorizes me to be teacher? What in my past and present molds and edifies my vision of some possible answers to this question?" To say that I have changed is both an over and an under-statement, for along this path of researching I have confirmed and re-affirmed many fundamental beliefs I have held about being with students. Before this work, I was taunted by the guilt that I was not "doing things by the book," somehow I never found course outlines or prescribed texts that perfectly fit my beliefs. So I hid in my little army hut of a classroom, did what I felt was right and hoped no one would catch me in this subversive activity.

As I explored within myself, I began to see that the way I am with people has a very strong theme of bonding and weaving together. I experienced my first conscious realization of this the summer of 1981 as my beloved Granny was dying. I wrote "I am Glue" in my journal at that time as I began to see my role as "one who puts together" in our family. At the beginning of her final dying process, my grandfather was unable to do the caring for my Granny; his moral code made it seem improper for him to wash her body and gently massage a soothing lotion on her parched skin. Intuitively, I was able to teach him how to do this for her as a loving care-giver. I was also able in many other ways, to bring family members together in this dying-time of our matriarch -- the one who held us all as one. It also began to become clear that I had understudied this lady throughout my whole life. I had spent most of my childhood holidays under her watchful, loving eye. I used to laugh years ago when she would knit what seemed like hundreds of pairs of slippers for

my children (her great-grandchildren). Sometimes I would open the parcels that came in the mail, and a multitude of colored yarn all stitched together in the shapes of slippers would tumble out, as if eager to warm the precious little feet of the youngsters in my home. I still have some of those rare treasures in my boxes -- some tattered, others barely worn before tiny feet became bigger feet. I didn't understand in those days what it meant to her, and ultimately to us all, to knit together those miles of yarn for her loved ones.

I did not knit when my grandmother was alive, I do now. I feel an immense comfort in taking up the yarn, stitching the textures and colors together in patterns and shapes. I feel an at-homeness in this activity, a grounding of myself with my very nature. It reinforces the foundation of who I am now and reflects itself in my actions toward my family and the family of my students within our classroom. The unwrapping or unfolding of a simple ball of yarn sometimes evolves or develops, with the help of a skilled artist, into a priceless living piece of art. This evolving, unwrapping yet weaving into a more complex whole, is analogous to the meaning of literacy as I have come to understand it. The balls of yarn become themes, the studying of which reveals a deeper understanding of the tapestry of our being together in this field of education.

Theme of Struggle

What is struggle? What purpose does it serve in the process of becoming literate? Should we, as teachers, take the right of struggle away, or should we allow the beauty of the changing to occur with our gentle, yet solid support? Like the butterfly that was so thoughtlessly helped from its cocoon, the literacy student could be denied the essence of the becoming. We must be ever-mindful of our place in this growing and open the doors to the world without pushing or pulling the learner through. Real learning comes from the internalizing and understanding from within, not from the dictating of the teacher.

The core of struggle is indeed a delicate balance. Someone like Crystal needs to be gently allowed or given permission to engage in the struggle. She needed to know that it is "okay" for her to learn; that no one was going to

ridicule her or lock her up if she made unsuccessful attempts. "*Now I know I have the right to learn and can learn too, just like everyone else.*" Aaron needed someone to listen; he already had the words but struggled to get them out. He dreaded making errors and had to be reassured that it was the essence of his story that was important in his journalling, not the grammar. Aaron's struggle became increasingly articulated as he poured out his words, ever-searching for more people to listen. Rod's struggle was not only with his inner self in trying to seek the courage to speak and tell his story or with his outer self in trying to find an audience for his saga; it reached out and encompassed a struggle with the world. He was engaged in a battle that could not free him to personal development -- the world was the enemy that must be controlled. Sharing control would, to him, be weakness and vulnerability and this was apparently unacceptable for Rod. Both Crystal and Aaron continue to struggle with their literacy issues, but on seemingly different levels or planes. Her grappling, while sometimes public, is mostly internal, and she began her Intermediate Level Adult Basic Education courses at another community college last fall. Aaron's battle is very public: he has all but forgotten his personal development, focussing instead on mobilizing troops to eradicate his outward foe and discontinuing his more formal studies. Rod has disappeared, denying the struggle as it became unbearable and perhaps seeking a new arena.

The paths to literacy are indeed varied, but each must have his own journey, choosing direction and destination for himself, not for others. As a teacher, I must be willing to accept my role in this drama, one of supporting actress, not director or producer. As a supporting player, I can offer strength, countenance or counsel: I can assist in the struggles of my students but I cannot deny them their right of choice. Inward, outward, public, private? They must decide and act.

Theme of Abuse

I hesitate to elaborate on what seems so blatantly obvious within the stories of Crystal, Aaron and Rod, but the element of the experience of physical, emotional and ultimately, spiritual abuse is too profound to ignore. How can someone who has known mostly pain grow up to believe in their inner

abilities and capabilities? I agree with you as you answer me with the truth that not all of our literacy learners have suffered the kinds of abuse we witnessed within the stories of Crystal and Aaron, but I would remind you that if we listen closely to literacy students, we will hear of some incident or happenings that dealt a severe blow to self-esteem. This, I suggest, is an abuse.

We see and feel the anguish of Crystal and Aaron as we read their stories, and Rod also spoke of mistreatment at the hands of parents, foster-parents and teachers in private schools. I see this abuse as the ultimate oppression. If we force our children or others in our care to succumb to our views and treat them as objects to be all-powerful over, then we rob them of their individuality and right to live and learn as they are bound to. They become oppressed and the oppressed, as Freire says in *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (1987), often suffer in silence. He has also said (1970a):

> In the culture of silence the masses are "mute," that is, they are prohibited from creatively taking part in the transformations of their society and therefore prohibited from being. . . . What they do not know in the culture of silence . . . is that men's actions as such are transforming, creative, and recreative . . . they do not know that their action upon the world is also transforming. Prevented from having a "structural perception" of the facts involving them, they do not know that they cannot "have a voice" . . . the literacy process must relate speaking the word to transforming reality, and to man's role in this transformation. Perceiving the significance of that relationship is indispensable for those learning to read and write. . . . Such a perception will lead the learners to recognize a much greater right than that of being literate. They will ultimately recognize that, as men, they have the right to have a voice. (p. 213)

When literacy instructors offer learners the opportunity to reflect and write their stories in their journals, they create the possibility of a breaking of the cycle of oppression and abuse. By "listening" to the voices of their students' writings they can show a path to transformation through literacy.

Themes of Darkness and Silence

The darkness and silence of the root cellar and later the closet in her marital home were merely symbolic representations of Crystal's "real" life. She was unable to read and write and was so cruelly denied the comfort of speaking and being with others. *"Never had anyone to talk to. Not allowed!"* was a refrain that repeated itself throughout her journal entries. She had to train herself to be silent in her marriage.

> *I just couldn't please him. I learned fast to keep my mouth shut. I got that I knew every snap of his fingers, for coffee 2 snaps. 3 for hunger. And so on. . . . He liked to hurt and was good at it. You just didn't know how good. . . . I taught myself to not cry out anymore. . . . So I just didn't say anything. . . .*

When she did speak and try to get help as she did on a few occasions by going to a sheltered home with her children, she found that people didn't seem to believe her story or could not help her. They would let her stay in the home for a few days and then she would have to move on.

> *A few days go by. Then one morning here comes the worker, the one you told everything to. Tells you that you can't stay here anymore. Well all these things go through your mind. Where do we go? Home, that's where. Well home again, same old home. Things don't get better. . . .*

Speaking out offered no comfort or sanctuary, the silence and safety of the room were at least a known entity.

Aaron was banished to silence and an emotional darkness.

> *I came from a very abusive family background, from a family that didn't show any support or interest in me or what I was doing in school. . . . I had to be silent and not move around at the table, and look straight forward, in other words be an emotional robot. If I didn't do*

that perfectly I either would get a knife slammed across my knuckles or a backhand across the face.

His silence became an unbearable prison and he was compelled to find somewhere else to live when he was a teenager. "*I left home at the age of 14 and went and lived with a businessman and his wife and son.*" It was here that he began to watch "*news, news and more news*" and began to acquire a vocabulary that would help him mask his illiteracy for the next twenty years. He was able to speak with almost anyone about almost anything, all the while fearing the dark terror of discovery.

Rod, too, was locked away into a silent world. He told of being put away in a "*mental hospital*" when he was quite young because he could not express himself in the "*acceptable*" manner expected by the school and classroom he was in. He tells of being bound as a punishment for being left-handed; his left thumb was tied to his belt-loop so that he was forced to use his right hand. This took away his power to learn to write like the "*other kids*": he could not seem to produce the same kind of work with such a foreign instrument as his right hand. He glowed when he told of someone finally finding him in the prison of despair, recognizing that the boy was not insane. He was given another chance in the outside world.

All of these learners were kept by their captors in a silent world. Speaking was forbidden and communication with other human beings was sharply limited. They were also kept in the dark. . . . Sometimes the darkness was physical, but always it was symbolic. When the eyes are deprived of light, we become blind. We cannot see our own worth or ability to learn and we accept our ignorance as our punishment for our blindness. Aaron speaks of his dawning awareness of becoming literate as a glowing state, and says that "*the light at the end of the tunnel is a rainbow.*" Crystal likened her emancipation thus: "*It's like a blind person seeing for the first time. It's nice. I like it.*"

A glimpsing of the light of literacy and awareness forever frees and offers a voice to banish the imposed silence.

Meaning of Literacy

Are grades or skill levels to be the true measure of a person's literacy? What of the personal perception and understanding? Freire (1970a) tells us that,

> Becoming literate . . . means far more than learning to decode the written representation of a sound system. It is truly an act of *knowing* through which a person is able to look critically at the culture which has shaped him, and to move toward reflection and positive action upon his world. (p. 205)

What is this act of knowing? How do we determine if this has happened? I believe we must look to the learner for our answers; they hold the keys to our understanding of what it means to them to become literate.

For Crystal, the inner knowing was all she needed to take wing and embrace her journey "Into the Light." Rod continued to bluff his way through his daily existence, blaming others for his illiteracy and not taking hold and doing something to change his literacy situation. Aaron reflected on his thoughts about literacy:

> *You walk around meeting people from day to day, they don't know anything about your background or what you're hiding inside. . . . To some of these people there is no such thing as Literacy. . . . People today walk around blind to the fact that there is any kind of problem. . . . I feel embarrassed for myself. I'm sure that so many people that talk on Literacy have never lived it. I think to talk on it you would get a much greater perspective of Literacy if you have lived it. Literacy is not just not being able to read and write. Literacy to me is the emotions of all the feeling of failure, acceptance of society, guilt of feeling inadequate. . . . If people could realize that education and being intelligent are two different things, then we would be a much better society.*

Threads of Relating

The intertwining of my own theme of gathering and weaving people together is elucidated by the ancient philosophy of Huna (Max Freedom Long in the *Secret Science of Miracles*). The cosmic threads which attach us all are called Aka cords. These Aka cords are said to emanate from each of us in a very special way; they are composed of a sticky, infinitely microscopic substance which adheres to everyone and everything we come in contact with. We are always in touch with, at once, all we have touched and all we touch now. Some aka connections are stronger than others, but, once connected, are not broken. The threads of human interaction weave an elaborate, unique life pattern for each of us. My edification as a teacher and as a human takes form through my experiences and awareness. I have become attuned to Margaret Hunsberger's (1983) words:

> The teacher is for the student . . . a kind of living text who guides the student into text interpretation, into what it's like to read. (p. 4)

Is the text here life? Is it that which is woven to create a unique texture -- the harmonious quality of the arrangement of the parts of the whole?

The literacy curriculum, as we live it in and out of our classroom, shapes and weaves us into the grander fabric of our existence; but we must first look deeply within ourselves in order to truly see another human being. Reflecting on our own story with the support of a caring other is a powerful life-enhancing tool. Belenky, et al (1986) speak of this shared reflection.

> In order for reflection to occur, the oral and written forms of language must pass back and forth between persons who both speak and listen or read and write -- sharing, expanding, and reflecting on each other's experiences. Such interchanges lead to ways of knowing that enable individuals to enter into the social and intellectual life of their community. Without them, individuals remain isolated from others, and without tools for representing their experiences, people also remain isolated from the self. (p. 26)

Sharing our stories tells us and others what we value and revere. These stories share our differences as well. As we come to listen to and understand others, we can come to accept and appreciate our individualities. Indeed, these differences enfold the secrets of our personal being, those qualities which make us unique. The technique of using dialoguing journals between teacher and learner is invaluable in revealing and understanding these qualities.

We must be careful, though, that we do not embark on a journey through journalling with students if we are not well prepared to face the pitfalls that can arise. If one has not yet begun a personal inner search, how can she help others beginning this phase of being? As an instructor preparing to listen to the writings of students, part of the preparation is also to be well aware of supportive community resources. This is necessary in that inevitably when the journalling begins, emotions bubble to the surface of consciousness and these often require the help of a skilled professional. The ethical teacher will not try to be a counsellor to the learner at this time, she needs to refer the student to someone who is trained in helping in this way. It is recommended that the instructor invite skilled professionals such as counsellors into the classroom early in the term so that the learners have a chance to meet them. Then, when the event arises that the learner needs the help of a counsellor, he will not feel like he is being referred to a stranger.

Dialoguing journals, while extremely rich and rewarding for both learner and instructor, are to be cautiously shared. Once two lives become intertwined within the writings and revelations, they are forever joined through the knowing of the other.

Travelling this researching path has caused the exquisite texture of human beingness to become more brilliant and intense to my gaze. I have become more attuned to others, and also more aware that we are so beautifully unique yet joined. I am reminded of my dear Granny who used to take a knitted garment that no longer fit someone in her family and unravel the stitches. She would quickly and effortlessly undo hours of handiwork and then, with the crinkled, bumpy, "new" yarn, she would create another garment. Sometimes I would ask myself if this new garment had a life of its own or if it

held a memory of its old existence, or I would wonder if that original garment ceased to exist and if the de-constructing of that whole influenced the re-constructing of the other. And even though these questions underlie my wondering about my interactions with students and classes in the past, present and future, I have a deep knowing or understanding that, yes, the memories of the old are not erased or obliterated. They are there for those who can feel or remember their presence.

With each new school year or class, there is a certain newness, a freshness rooted in choices and resurrected chances of learning. Yet, knitted deep within this newness is the memory of other classes and students and experiences. Familiar patterns or stitches reveal themselves to me and the knowledge of this past influences and enhances the life of this new class.

As I explored the themes of abuse, struggle, darkness and silence within Crystal's, Aaron's and Rod's stories, I also searched for a ground in mine. As the unwrapping and revealing of stories and values began, a connection or joining of human beings took place. I found myself to be a knitter and weaver of people, constructing harmonious classes and relationships. Disturbingly at times, I came to question my self-worth, my teaching, my motives and my purpose throughout this phase or my researcher's journey. My handiwork at times needs redoing as I discover mistakes or incompatibilities and I realize I am not at the beginning or the end. I am somewhere in the middle, closer to where I am going but knowing that is not the end. I have some baskets at home that have knitting in various stages of development nestled within. They are projects and tasks waiting for my hands to pick them up and bring them closer to what they aspire to become. Linen, cotton, angora and wool all holding the promise of an experience of combining textures and patterns -- a new class awaits in the fall, as well, also promising the joy of this intertwining of differences and similarities.

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APPENDIX A

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APPENDIX B

DR. PAUL GALLAGHER'S RESPONSE

The following address was given by Dr. Paul Gallagher to the literacy symposium, *Research on Literacy: Local and International Perspectives*, at the University of British Columbia on October 5, 1990. Dr. Gallagher was responding to two presentation:

1. *A Search for the Meaning of Becoming Literate: An Interpretive Inquiry* by Lynn Hunter, and
2. *The Reluctant Learner: A Research Report on Nonparticipation and Dropout in Literacy Programs in British Columbia* by Audrey M. Thomas.

First, I want to declare my lack of qualifications for the task of relating these studies to issues I consider important or even responding to what you've heard from Audrey and Lynn. I'm not a researcher. I am not trained in research methodology, I am not a veteran at even critiquing the research of other people. I think of myself as a practitioner and as an advocate, and the best that I can claim is that I have read a variety of research reports, and in truth, I've read critiques of research reports. You will receive, then, the comments of an amateur and a person who welcomes revolutions and tempests, and I will come back to that theme later on.

Let me say something about the similarities between the two studies first. The dominant similarity that I see is the personalization of their research. My own experience with research prompts me to comment that a great deal of research is deliberately detached, I don't say even dehumanized, in an effort to demonstrate objectivity. The term my daughter, who is a researcher, says, "that's positive stuff." People become subjects, bloodless analyses are made,

and emotionless conclusions or findings are reported, and then on to the next investigation. The Thomas and Hunter studies do not fit this mode, almost to the point of, in my view or in my experience, not being quite legitimate. Audrey Thomas' study effectively concludes that reluctant learners are quite like the rest of us. They're unique, they're different, very difficult to categorize; they're individual people with strengths and weaknesses and hearts, as well as intellects.

Lynn's study is as much poetry as it is research. Her subjects and herself quite literally jumped out of the page at me. I'm not familiar with phenomenological writing, and so I was really intrigued by Lynn Hunter's work. She provided only a few words on her methodology, she did not articulate an hypothesis, at least that I could identify, she did not describe any test or analysis, she reported no organized findings. But she did, for me at any rate, humanize something that I hear referred to as "curriculum and instruction." She humanized learners. She blended educational theory with personal reflection, and she demonstrated anguish, as well as joy, in her role as a worker with adult learners. In my experience, research is not supposed to be moving. It is supposed to be analytical and objective. Lynn Hunter's work, for me, was very moving and symbolic and personal but equally analytical.

I'm unabashedly a fan of Audrey Thomas. She writes about issues that are important to me. She writes about reality as I think reality is. She's a little more conventional in her research methodology than Lynn Hunter, but the individuality and the humanness of reluctant learners is as evident in Audrey Thomas' study as it is in Lynn Hunter's. As well, Audrey Thomas draws out conclusions and findings for practitioners like myself and my college and community colleagues more directly than Lynn Hunter did. Audrey Thomas, in my view, encourages public policy action, while Lynn Hunter compels personal choices and decisions.

What are the values of these studies? Patricia Cross, at Harvard I believe, was the first person, or the first person I came in contact with, who used the term "reflective practice." She encouraged college teachers to think about what they're doing, to reflect on what they were doing, to talk to their colleagues about what they were doing and to report what they were learning,

so that more of them could become artists at teaching and learning. The first benefit, then, of these studies, to me, is that they are excellent examples of reflective practice, and a lot of us who hope to be practitioners could benefit from that point of view. The second benefit or value is that they should be particularly useful to planners and administrators and birds like myself who are relatively remote from the real action between learners and teachers, or between learners with different tasks, and where people who constantly deal, I think with abstractions, who deal with numbers, and policy statements and administrative procedures, too often not mindful that the numbers are real people, and the policy statements affect individual human beings, and that administrative procedures tend to herd people. It's very useful for people who do the kind of work that I try to do to be reminded that reluctant learners are very much like me, that they have individual personalities, and that people struggling with becoming literate wish to be empowered as I have been empowered. Audrey Thomas and Lynn Hunter have provided those reminders. Audrey Thomas' reminders are more to planners and administrators, Lynn Hunter more to learners and teachers, but both of them to anyone concerned about the humanity of the educational process.

Let me put all of that aside and tell you what I think is the greatest value. For somewhat more than three years now, some people in this room and others and I have been trying to increase public awareness of adult literacy needs in our province, and more particularly to influence government policy and support in this field. Particularly with respect to government policy and support, these efforts have been notably unsuccessful. It now strikes me that the powerful public, and particularly government, have been unresponsive because the advocates, including myself, have used positivist approaches to the issues. Perhaps more intensive exposure to human dimensions of adult literacy, as presented by Audrey Thomas and Lynn Hunter, would be more successful in reaching and touching the shapers of public policy. I suspect, as well, that there are international implications to the works that we have heard about. Even though their research is really localized, not only to British Columbia, but to little pieces of British Columbia, the fact is that reluctant learners are everywhere. People struggling to be heard, to empower themselves, can be found throughout the world. Teachers wishing to analyze their own practices are not unique to particular geographic areas.

Administrators and planners everywhere need to appreciate that their influences and their decisions touch individual people in very personal ways. How to influence public policy on behalf of the less advantaged is, I suspect, a universal challenge. The work of Audrey Thomas and Lynn Hunter will not provoke big revolutions. They could, however, encourage a whole lot of little tempests. Thank you.

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